



A review of Social Psychology Ethics

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Abstract

Social psychology is the study of how people think about, influence and relate to others. It emerged at the interface of psychology and sociology in the early 20th century. While Psychology analyses the nature of humans, sociology analyses the nature of society. Social psychology on the other hand, analyses the nature and the relation of man to society. The sphere of social psychology is social and its focus is individual. It is the study of individual in social situation. This social situation can be person to person interaction, person to group interaction and a group related to another group. A social psychologist uses scientific methods to study how we perceive peoples and social events, how do we influence others and get influenced, social relation and communication and group dynamics.

Key words: social, Psychology, communication, nature, behavioral etc.

Introduction

Social psychology is a branch of psychology that studies cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes of individuals as influenced by their group membership and interactions, and other factors that affect social life, such as social status, role, and social class. Social psychology examines the effects of social contacts on the development of attitudes, stereotypes, discrimination, group dynamics, conformity, social cognition and influence, self-concept, persuasion, interpersonal perception and attraction, cognitive dissonance, and human relationships. A significant number of social psychologists are sociologists. Their work has a greater focus on the behavior of the group, and thus examines such phenomena as interactions and social exchanges at the micro-level, and group dynamics and crowd psychology at the macro-level. Sociologists are interested in the individual, but primarily within the context of social structures and processes, such as social roles, race and class, and socialization. They tend to use both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Sociologists in this area are interested in a variety of demographic, social, and cultural phenomena. Some of their major research areas are social inequality, group dynamics, social change, socialization, social identity, and symbolic interactionism. During World War II, social



psychologists studied persuasion and propaganda for the US military. After the war, researchers became interested in a variety of social problems, including gender issues and racial prejudice. In the 1960s, there was growing interest in a variety of new topics, such as cognitive dissonance, bystander intervention, and aggression. By the 1970s, however, social psychology in America had reached a crisis. There was heated debate over the ethics of laboratory experimentation, whether or not attitudes really predicted behavior, and how much science could be done in a cultural context. This was also the time when a radical situations approach challenged the relevance of self and personality in psychology.

Social Psychology Ethics

The goal of social psychology is to understand cognition and behavior as they naturally occur in a social context, but the very act of observing people can influence and alter their behavior. For this reason, many social psychology experiments utilize deception to conceal or distort certain aspects of the study. Deception may include false cover stories, false participants (known as confederates or stooges), false feedback given to the participants, and so on. The practice of deception has been challenged by some psychologists who maintain that deception under any circumstances is unethical, and that other research strategies (such as role-playing) should be used instead.

Influences from Psychology in General

While socio-political factors have helped to shape social psychology, its concerns and methodologies have also been influenced by changes taking place in other fields of psychology. Interestingly, however, in the first decades of the modern experimental era in social psychology, it was social psychology's relative independence from developments in the mainstreams of the field that was most notable. While many areas of psychology became steeped in psychoanalytic theory in the 1920s and remained so well past WWII, social psychology remained largely unaffected by Freudian thought. Likewise, while general experimental psychology during those decades came under the sway of “behaviourism” and various conditioning models, social psychology did not succumb to the reductionism of Watson, Pavlov, Hull, Skinner, and company. Instead, with only a few exceptions, the field remained resolutely cognitive. Indeed, social psychology's insistence on the central role of “meaning” attached to potential stimuli, responses, reinforces, and ultimately more complex social contexts, constitutes one of its most powerful continuing legacies.



History of Social Psychology

The science of social psychology began when scientists first started to systematically and formally measure the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of human beings. The earliest social psychology experiments on group behavior were conducted before 1900, and the first social psychology textbooks were published in 1908. During the 1940s and 1950s, the social psychologists Kurt Lewin and Leon Festinger refined the experimental approach to studying behavior, creating social psychology as a rigorous scientific discipline. Lewin is sometimes known as “the father of social psychology” because he initially developed many of the important ideas of the discipline, including a focus on the dynamic interactions among people. In 1954, Festinger edited an influential book called *Research Methods in the Behavioral Sciences*, in which he and other social psychologists stressed the need to measure variables and to use laboratory experiments to systematically test research hypotheses about social behavior. He also noted that it might be necessary in these experiments to deceive the participants about the true nature of the research.

Social psychology was energized by researchers who attempted to understand how the German dictator Adolf Hitler could have produced such extreme obedience and horrendous behaviors in his followers during the Second World War. Philip Zimbardo, in his well-known “prison experiment” found that ordinary male college students who were recruited to play the roles of guards and prisoners in a simulated prison became so involved in their assignments, and their interaction became so violent, that the study had to be terminated early. This research again demonstrated the power of the social setting.

Social Psychology Today

Recent history in social psychology has seen contributions to theory and research in three major areas: the study of stereotyping, prejudice, and racism; the study of culture and cultural influences; and the study of cognitive and motivational influences beyond, or even contrary to, the rational self-interest model central to economics and other social sciences. Each area has witnessed upswings and downturns in the interest it has received, and each has seen marked shifts in focus as new generations of researchers have come to the fore.

- **Stereotyping and Prejudice**



From the 1920s to the present, a major concern in social psychology has been the nature and effects of stereotyping and prejudice; however, the focus of research has regularly shifted. In the 1920s and 1930s, the main concern of leading researchers including Thurstone, Bogardus, Likert, and others was the development of reliable and valid methods for measuring negative attitudes toward various racial and ethnic groups. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, as Miller and his Yale colleagues sought to translate psychoanalytic insights into learning theory models, studies of the motivational bases for prejudice came to the fore in social psychology, and phenomena such as scapegoating and displacement were explored empirically. At the same time, and in much the same spirit, personality theorists led by Adorno and colleagues explored ethnocentrism and authoritarianism.

- **The Role of Culture**

A second major issue that has received an enormous amount of recent attention is the topic of culture and cultural differences. Following WWII, almost all students of social psychology were familiar with the work of Ruth Benedict, Alfred Kroeber, and other anthropologists in the Franz Boas tradition. Social psychologists were frequently billeted in interdisciplinary programs, such as the Institute for Human Relations at Yale, the Institute for Social Research at Michigan, the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, and the Department of Social Psychology at Columbia, where they worked side by side with Clyde Kluckholm, John Whiting, Margaret Mead, and other eminent scholars. Researchers in many places used the Human Relations Area Files to empirically test postulated relationships between cultural practices or circumstances and features of modal personality. In short, the topic of cultural differences, and anthropology and sociology more generally, had long occupied a niche within social psychology.

- **Critique of Homo Economicus**

A third topic with both a long history in social psychology and a more recent spiking of interest involves the limitations of homo economicus—the standard economic model of individuals as rational maximizers of utility that has dominated political theory since the eighteenth-century writings of Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Although our critiques today borrow heavily from modern work in the judgment and decision-making tradition, it can be noted that social psychologists never fully succumbed to the appeal of rational decision-making models and functionalist approaches more generally. They never forgot that



people (to borrow a biblical maxim) “do not live by bread alone,” but are influenced by a variety of social motives and values that get in the way of maximizing material outcomes.

- **Promising New Directions**

Many other topics and approaches are also stimulating new and potentially important work. Most of them draw on one or more of the field's four foundational insights discussed earlier. Space concerns compel us to offer only a sample of illustrative examples:

- Evolutionary Psychology
- Implicit Influences
- Terror Management Theory
- Positive Psychology
- Self-Regulation
- Hedonic Adaptation
- Close Relationships
- Virtual Interaction
- Social Cognitive Neuroscience

Conclusion

Social Psychology has evolved tremendously since the beginnings of the study of the science. It has had a major influence on a variety of major real world societal problems. The study of social psychology has had many early influencers and it continues to be an evolving subject. Currently there are many social psychological ideas and commentaries in major popular media and books. Social psychological concepts have come a common way in which people talk about and understand individuals and societies. Because of social psychology there are many advancement in health, environmental, and legal psychology. Today social psychology is in all psychology departments at major universities around the world.

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